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## THE AMERICAN INTERVENTION IN WEST FLORIDA

THE centennial celebration of the Louisiana Purchase brought once more into current use the term "West Florida" and applied it definitely to the territory lying south of the thirty-first parallel between the Mississippi and the Perdido rivers. Before this that area was regarded as a part of either the Florida or the Louisiana Purchase, while the term itself, if used at all, suggested an uncertain British or Spanish colony so early absorbed by neighboring states that its brief annals were of no concern in our national history. If one subscribes to the principle, "right or wrong, my country", there is much to justify, or at least explain, this neglect; but even with the restricted area mentioned above, West Florida has had a significance far beyond its mere size or productivity. Within its narrow limits centred the problems connected with our southern boundary, the navigation of the Mississippi and of the Mobile, and the defense of our southern frontier. During the critical decade following 1803 it was the scene of many minor frontier events that involved our diplomatic relations with the three leading powers of Western Europe. It had its prototype in the Natchez District, whose occupation in 1797-1798 rendered its own acquisition a foregone conclusion; while nearly every detail of its history affords a striking comparison with a like event in the history of Texas, New Mexico, or California. Indeed in 1830 Lucas Alamán, the Mexican secretary of state, expressly used West Florida as a warning example of what was then taking place in Texas, and Almonte and Santa Anna, thirteen years later, vainly attempted to forestall a like condition of affairs in California.<sup>1</sup>

The intervention by the United States in West Florida was due to two distinct causes—a spirit of territorial acquisition, expressing itself in popular clamor, fruitless diplomacy, and a series of frontier disturbances; and domestic revolt within the territory itself. The increase of American population in the southwest, particularly in the Natchez and Tombigbee districts of Mississippi Territory before and immediately after 1798, created a popular demand for an uninterrupted outlet to the Gulf of Mexico. This was only partially

<sup>1</sup> A copy of Alamán's memorial is in Mexican Despatches, III., Bureau of Indexes and Archives, Department of State. For other references see Garrison, *Westward Extension*, p. 27; Von Holst, *Constitutional History of the United States*, III. 110; H. H. Bancroft, *History of the North Mexican States and Texas*, II. 113, and *California*, vol. IV., ch. xvi.

appeared by the uncertain privilege of deposit at New Orleans or the later purchase of Louisiana, for the Mobile was secondary only to the Mississippi as a highway for our southwestern commerce, and still other streams might in the future acquire an equal prominence. The United States must possess all the territory east of the Mississippi in order to meet the commercial and defensive problems of our southern border and the wishes of an Anglo-American population on both sides of the line of demarcation. Indeed, from a physiographic standpoint a permanently divided sovereignty in the region was unthinkable.

To those citizens of the United States who lived just above the thirty-first parallel the exactions levied by the Spaniards on their commerce at Mobile and the temptation afforded by the presence at Baton Rouge of a Bourbon regimen lacking all prestige, were continual incentives to border forays or to personal controversies and animosities that almost exhausted the patience of both governments and led both to appeal to the sinister arbitration of Napoleon.<sup>2</sup> For nearly two decades our State Department attempted to deal with the problems presented by the spirit of expansion and ensuing frontier disturbances, either by directly purchasing the whole of the Floridas from Spain or by securing the strategic portion through untenable claims strengthened by subserviency to France or England. When diplomatic bargain or chicanery failed to gain the coveted region, the inhabitants of West Florida took advantage of Spain's necessity to revolt and thus force the American authorities to intervene, for the double purpose of preserving order in their own contiguous territories and of realizing their territorial ambition. It was this intervention that brought the revolted region into the Union and ultimately led to the acquisition of the rest of the Floridas.

Jefferson had perceived the possibility of such a result while yet a member of Washington's Cabinet. Hearing that Governor Quesada of East Florida was inviting foreigners to settle in his territory, he thus expressed himself to his superior:

I wish a hundred thousand of our inhabitants would accept the invitation. It may be the means of delivering to us peaceably what may otherwise cost a war. In the meantime we may complain of this seduc-

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *American State Papers, Foreign Relations*, II. 678 ff.; Claiborne, Correspondence, vols. II. and III., *passim*; and Spanish Notes, vol. I., *passim*. The Claiborne Correspondence in six manuscript volumes is in the Bureau of Rolls and Library of the State Department. The manuscript volumes of the Spanish Notes are in the Bureau of Indexes and Archives, State Department. For permission to use these collections I am indebted to the officials in charge during the years 1903-1907.

tion of our inhabitants just enough to make them believe we think it very wise policy for them and confirm them in it.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile Jefferson and his successors, largely influenced by his direct suggestion and advice, skilfully utilized every diplomatic opportunity from the Nootka Sound episode to the overthrow of the Bourbon rulers of Spain to secure the Floridas. The offer to guarantee the remaining possessions of Spain beyond the Mississippi, the attempt to take advantage of European wars, the imbroglio with France and the threat of possible alliance with Great Britain, the specious reasoning that sought to include West Florida within the Louisiana Purchase, and even the shameless subordination of national honor at Napoleon's behest—all these failed to bring us the coveted territory. However, two decades of adroit public appeal had created a vigorous national sentiment in favor of this acquisition. At the same time Spain's repressive commercial policy, first at New Orleans and later at Mobile; her intrigues with the southern Indians and with certain political leaders of our western settlements; and her attempt to push the boundary line of the Floridas as far northward as the mouth of the Yazoo, had strengthened this sentiment into a feeling of intense resentment towards her declining colonial power.

The cession of Louisiana by France to the United States placed a new importance upon Spain's retention of the Floridas. In the opinion of the Marqués de Casa Yrujo, her minister residing in Philadelphia, this transfer threatened no worse result than clandestine trading by the Americans within the Mexican provinces, and even this practice could be checked, if not absolutely controlled, as long as Spain possessed the power to make reprisals from the Floridas. So far as more ambitious attempts of the western states upon Mexico were concerned, these could readily be neutralized, if Spain continued to possess the Floridas and Havana, by blockading the mouth of the Mississippi. The possession of the whole of West Florida, however, as well as East Florida, was essential to her purpose, and this formed an additional motive for Spain to resist all American attempts to wrest this territory from her.<sup>4</sup>

If the Louisiana Purchase emphasized the importance of the Floridas to Spain, it also brought into prominence the fact that

<sup>3</sup> Jefferson to Washington, April 2, 1791. MS., Miscellaneous Letters, vol. V., Bureau of Indexes and Archives.

<sup>4</sup> Casa Yrujo to Cevallos, August 3 and November 5, 1803, in Mr. Henry Adams's transcripts of Spanish State Papers, MSS., Bureau of Rolls and Library, Department of State; Spanish Transcripts, Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Miss.; also Robertson, *Louisiana under Spain, France, and the United States*, II. 69, 118, 147, 332.

most of the inhabitants of the Floridas expected and desired annexation to the United States. When, to their disappointment, the American commissioners accepted Louisiana without demanding West Florida, the inhabitants of the Bayou Sara region, who were mostly of Anglo-American origin, began a series of border outrages in which the Kempers gained an unpleasant notoriety. At the same time renewed Spanish exactions at Mobile aroused the resentment of the settlers of the Tombigbee region, largely peopled by recent American immigrants from Georgia, the Carolinas, and Tennessee. James Caller and Joseph P. Kennedy aspired to the leadership of the more radical elements of this population. On neither side of the line of demarcation did the local authorities seem wholly able to repress the disorders, although Harry Toulmin, the federal judge of this district, succeeded in checkmating the more ambitious filibustering projects against Mobile.<sup>5</sup> In time this lawless condition along both the Mobile and the Mississippi became a most potent argument in favor of American intervention.

While in these various ways the American spirit of territorial acquisition was working toward the ultimate absorption of the Floridas, conditions within these regions were gradually shaping themselves to the same end. The Creole population centring about Mobile seems to have been largely indifferent to the various international factors that were to determine their ultimate destiny and for the most part remained quiescent under the expiring Spanish authority. The forces that led to intervention in this region, therefore, must be sought for outside the territory itself, and are to be found in the filibustering plans mentioned above and the military necessity for the occupation of Mobile in 1813.

A far different condition of affairs obtained in the Baton Rouge jurisdiction. Here the population was almost exclusively Anglo-American. There was an element composed of Tory immigrants of the Revolutionary period or still earlier settlers who had passed directly from a British to a Spanish citizenship. There were those who because of British or Spanish sympathies had removed from above the line since 1798; and finally, later American immigrants whom the liberal land policy of the Spaniards had attracted into the region or who found there a ready asylum from the consequences

<sup>5</sup> See the authorities mentioned in note 2, and also Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Sparks to the Secretary of War, July 12, 1810, MS. in Papers Relating to Revolted Spanish Provinces, Bureau of Rolls and Library; *National Intelligencer* for November 7 and 13, 1810; AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW, II. 699 ff.; and Miss. Territorial Archives, MSS., Department of Archives and History, Jackson.

of crime or debt.<sup>6</sup> By 1810 the greater portion of each of these classes of West Florida's ill-assorted population regarded American domination with favor. To these Napoleon's overthrow of the Bourbon dynasty in the Spanish Peninsula was a signal rather than a cause for revolt. Aside from the time-factor West Florida had nothing else in common with the contemporaneous outbreaks in Mexico, Caracas, and Buenos Ayres. The dominant faction of its population simply seized the opportunity to join the American Union by a somewhat devious method. The Baton Rouge jurisdiction of West Florida, and more particularly the Bayou Sara or Feliciana District thus forced American intervention. Viewed from this standpoint, as a frontier rather than a diplomatic event, intervention seems inevitable and can be interpreted in a more natural way than has hitherto been employed.

The key that serves to explain this event and to connect the West Florida revolt with preceding diplomatic and border conditions is to be found in the correspondence of Madison's two chief agents—Governor W. C. C. Claiborne of Orleans and Governor David Holmes of Mississippi.<sup>7</sup> Their territories bordered upon the region in dispute, were separated by it, and thus rendered subject to possible foreign invasion. It was only natural, then, that from the very beginning of their administrations they should display an active interest in whatever was happening in the neighboring Spanish province. For many years Governor Claiborne's letters emphasize the unsatisfactory conditions existing on the West Florida border, and his active knowledge of the situation enabled him, at the critical juncture, to advise the American government as to its proper course. Holmes had only a few months' experience as governor of Mississippi Territory, when the West Florida question was thrust upon him, but his tact, geniality, and common-sense had already established his hold upon his own people and had recommended him to the population of the neighboring territory; so that his part in the critical events of 1810 was both helpful and successful. It is to his correspondence that we must turn for the best

<sup>6</sup> Claiborne states in a letter to Robert Smith, December 17, 1810, Claiborne Correspondence, vol. VI., "My impression is that a more heterogeneous mass of good and evil was never before gathered in the same extent of territory." For other references see A. Ellicott to the Secretary of State, January 10, 1799, in *Southern Boundary*, Andrew Ellicott Papers, MSS., Bureau of Rolls and Library; and McMaster, *History of the People of the United States*, III. 369.

<sup>7</sup> Note 2 mentions the Claiborne Correspondence, of which vol. VI. relates to the intervention in 1810. Governor Holmes's communications are to be found in *Proceedings of the Executive Council and Legislature in the Mississippi Territory* and Governor's Correspondence in the Mississippi Territory, MSS., Bureau of Rolls and Library.

account of the events which resulted in the American intervention.

In 1807 General James Wilkinson brought to the attention of the administration a "letter from a Gentleman in New Orleans" (probably Claiborne) of which he gave the following significant extracts:

Since your departure from this place, discontent begins to assume a very formidable aspect amongst the people of West Florida. They are ripe for violent measures. Two of their head men are now in this place, who tell me "that if the United States will not protect them they will solicit the assistance of England." The taking of Baton Rouge and Pensacola they speak of as matters of trifling achievement. They have about 400 men who will follow their standard to any length they please. This is the time, in my opinion, for the U. S. to make a speculation, as the floridians say they want no assistance in taking the country, and that all they would ask from Great Britain or any other power would be to maintain them in the possession which they had taken. . . . I wish you would feel Mr. Jefferson's pulse on this subject, if he is near you, and return me an answer by mail. One of the agents, a Captain whom you know, has seen this and will defer his visit to England until you answer me. His object is to effect the thing at all events and [he] feels sanguine that should the U. S. not be disposed, he will be able to induce the British to once more establish their Government at Pensacola.<sup>8</sup>

Jefferson's pulse was then experiencing an unexpected flutter on account of the unwarranted attack upon the Chesapeake; and from this fact the menace of British intervention in West Florida, so strongly emphasized in Claiborne's letter, acquired an additional significance. Hitherto Great Britain had shown no readiness to interfere in the affairs of that region, but the case might be different if engaged in war with the United States and urged to that end by a considerable faction of the Florida people who had formerly been British subjects. Our commissioners, therefore, must exert diplomatic pressure, through threats of ultimate appeal to force, to induce Spain to accommodate her differences with our government at the earliest possible moment.<sup>9</sup> Later instructions show that they were to continue to invoke the sinister aid of Napoleon to that same end.

The concluding period of Jefferson's administration and the first few months of the next were marked by a policy of chafing delay and indecision in regard to Florida affairs. In order to avoid paying for the coveted territory by an alliance with France against England, Jefferson at one time favored independent action on the part of the United States against Spain or at any rate a definite

<sup>8</sup> Papers in Relation to Burr's Conspiracy, MSS., Bureau of Rolls and Library. The extracts are endorsed: "Undated but probably June, 1807."

<sup>9</sup> Madison to Armstrong and Bowdoin, August 2 and October 18, 1807. Instructions, vol. VI., MSS., Bureau of Indexes and Archives.

agreement with that power.<sup>10</sup> This apparent determination to depend upon our own diplomacy, backed by definite action on the Florida frontier, was followed by the suggestion, made in August, 1808, that if England should prove more conciliatory the United States might take advantage of Napoleon's campaigns in Spain "to seize our own limits of Louisiana" (*i. e.*, West Florida to the Perdido), and "the residue of the Floridas as reprisal for spoliations".<sup>11</sup> Early in the following year he again inclined to seek Napoleon's aid in the matter.<sup>12</sup> He passed from office with the Floridas still outside the Union, but he felt confident that his successor would secure them, as well as Cuba, by the voluntary proffer of their inhabitants.<sup>13</sup> Rumor, indeed, accused Jefferson of stating his belief in the terse expression: "We must have the Floridas and Cuba." This report irritated the French minister, Turreau, and Madison hastened to inform him, through Gallatin, that:

We are and we wish to be strangers to all that passes in the Floridas, in Mexico, and also in Cuba. You would be mistaken if you supposed that Mr. Madison wishes the possession of the Floridas. That was Mr. Jefferson's hobby . . . it has never been the wish of his Cabinet; and Mr. Madison values to-day the possession of the Floridas only so far as they may be thought indispensable to prevent every kind of misunderstanding with Spain, and to secure an outlet for the produce of our Southern States. We have had no part in the meetings which have taken place in the Floridas.<sup>14</sup>

There is every evidence from Madison's past opinions and from his conduct in the immediate future that Gallatin more nearly represented his chief's real views when he spoke with reference to Cuba, than when he gave utterance to the above sentiments regarding the Floridas. At this point it may be well to note that the diplomatic factors over which Jefferson vacillated in 1809 were precisely those which he had discussed in the Nootka Sound episode, nearly twenty years before. Measured by results this diplomacy had gained for the United States—with but little personal credit for himself however—the settlement of the southern boundary, the free navigation of the Mississippi, and the Louisiana Purchase. These were all vital events in our national territorial history, but the very region so greatly desired in 1790 was still an alien possession; while the problem of Indian relations and other frontier issues, of unadjusted boundaries, of commercial restrictions and spoliations, rested upon our State Department with scarcely diminished pressure.

<sup>10</sup> P. L. Ford, *Writings of Jefferson*, IX. 134, 140, 195.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>14</sup> H. Adams, *History of the United States of America*, V. 37, 38.



If diplomacy based upon untenable claims and Spanish necessity had failed in its immediate purpose to acquire the Floridas, conditions in that portion of West Florida bordering on the Mississippi soon showed that the desired result might be brought about by the people of the region itself. In April, 1810, the adventurer, Samuel Fulton, now a Spanish subject residing at Baton Rouge, tendered his services to Madison, in case Spain succumbed to Bonaparte and Congress and the President desired to take possession of the contiguous territory. To justify his proffer he referred to an earlier tender of his services in 1803, when he had resigned from the French army; and stated that his position, as adjutant-general of the West Florida militia, which he had organized "in a highly creditable manner", and his knowledge of the country might render his "services useful to the government".<sup>15</sup> More effective than this offer, which may be regarded as typical of the attitude of many leading citizens in West Florida, were the reports of Governor Holmes of Mississippi, supplemented by the personal representations of Governor W. C. C. Claiborne.

In 1810 the latter was granted a leave of absence to visit Washington and vicinity, and while at the seat of government he seems to have gained the assent of President Madison to his plan of intervention, suggested three years before. The prospect for success at that time doubtless recommended such a policy to the American executive, who was wearied by years of futile diplomacy. At any rate, on June 14, 1810, Claiborne was empowered to write to William Wykoff, jr., a member of the Executive Council of Orleans Territory, advising him that in view of the prospect of South American independence West Florida might likewise seize the opportunity to become free. As the United States claimed this territory, such a move would mean that our government must intervene. It was highly desirable, however, to have this brought about as the result of an invitation from its people. "Can no means be devised", he asks, "to obtain such a request?" He mentions the presence of a French, an English, and an independent party among the people, but believes that none of these can realize its desire. "Nature has decreed the union of Florida with the United States", he affirms, "and the welfare of her inhabitants demands it." Wykoff was thereupon empowered to visit West Florida as an emissary of the United States, to reassure its inhabitants of the welcome they would receive from our government, and to suggest

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Fulton to Madison, April 20, 1810. MS., Madison Papers, Lenox Library. For permission to use this material I am indebted to Mr. Wilberforce Eames. For notice of Fulton, see *AM. HIST. REV.*, X. 270, n. 1.

a convention of its people, as far east as the Perdido, as the best means of bringing about a united request for American intervention.<sup>16</sup> This letter suggests that the American officials, influenced by Claiborne's representations, now preferred to secure their ends by a revolt, which would exhibit the appearance of spontaneity and at the same time conceal the real agency of our government.

By a coincidence that suggests previous collusion, the people of West Florida were even then pursuing almost the course that Claiborne outlined. On the 20th of June, 1810, Governor Holmes of Mississippi wrote to Robert Smith, secretary of state, that anarchy ruled throughout the neighboring province, where the regular authorities had ceased altogether to exercise their functions and voluntary police associations were absolutely ineffective. With regard to its future status the mixed population was divided into different national factions, of which the most important, the American, desired ultimate annexation to the United States. The leaders of this faction did not favor immediate action for fear of involving themselves in a premature revolt. Yet Holmes felt they would run this risk rather than to submit longer to anarchy or to foreign rule. The slave population and the refugee element were to be feared because of their influence upon contiguous American territory; but Holmes did not anticipate the intervention of any foreign power with the possible exception of Great Britain, and of the probability of this the Washington authorities would best know.<sup>17</sup>

It was nearly two months before Madison advised his incompetent secretary how to answer this communication. Governor Holmes was to keep a "wakeful eye" on West Florida and promptly to transmit any interesting reports therefrom to the seat of government. He was likewise to have his militia ready; and in case of foreign intervention or "internal convulsions" he was to protect the rights and interests of the United States "by every means within the limits of executive authority". So far Madison's advice might apply to any frontier commander in any emergency, but in view of Claiborne's previous attitude as shown by his letter to Wykoff, his closing words are extremely suggestive. "Will it not be advisable to apprise Governor H[olmes] confidentially of the course adopted as to W[est] F[lorida] and to have his co-operation in diffusing the impressions we wish to be made there?"<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Claiborne Correspondence, VI.

<sup>17</sup> Gov. Cor. Miss. Ter.

<sup>18</sup> Hunt, *Writings of Madison*, VIII. 105. The original letter bears the date of August 17, 1810, and is found in vol. 34 of Miscellaneous Letters, MSS., Bureau of Indexes and Archives.

In the meantime Holmes was using his "wakeful eye" and the citizens of West Florida were acting in a manner that showed little necessity for "diffusing" Madison "impressions". Holmes, a former Virginian, with a long service in Congress, probably knew thoroughly the wishes of the administration. As a territorial executive on a distant and exposed frontier, he knew of but one solution for the problem before him—ultimate annexation to the United States. To this end, therefore, he worked slowly but cautiously, and, just as a few years before, Louisiana came to us as a gift from Napoleon without any significant effort on our part, so now West Florida came into the American Union as the gift of its own people. Much of the credit for this final peaceful result is due to Holmes, because of his tactful common-sense, his frank and sincere interest in the task before him, and the prudence which marked each successive step in his policy. Moreover, it should be remembered that he acted without instructions from the seat of government, aside from one non-committal missive, until the latter part of September.

On the 1st of July the people of the Feliciana District, the most populous of West Florida, held a meeting for the purpose of proposing a general committee to exercise the powers of government in the province, with the co-operation of the existing Spanish officials. "You may readily conjecture", wrote Holmes on the 11th, "how this business will eventuate. I am satisfied, from a knowledge of the sentiments of some of the most respectable of the inhabitants, that the whole may be considered as incipient to the measure of asking protection of the United States." For his own part he adds, "that he utterly forebore to express his opinion as to the probable action" of our government.<sup>19</sup> Before the end of the month the four western districts of West Florida had organized a convention of sixteen men to assist Governor De Lassus "to promote the safety, honor and happiness of our beloved king, Ferdinand VII." At least so runs the published statement of its action, but Governor Holmes had direct information that betokened a different purpose. There were so many parties that the members of the convention were uncertain what course to pursue. While the majority desired annexation to the United States, they hesitated to ask openly for assistance, lest they should be overwhelmed by forces from Havana before the United States could act upon their application.<sup>20</sup> This

<sup>19</sup> Proceedings of the Executive Council and Legislature in the Mississippi Territory, vol. I.

<sup>20</sup> Holmes to R. Smith, July 31, 1810. Gov. Cor. Miss. Ter. Cf. also *National Intelligencer*, September 3 and 24, 1810.

situation suggests the conditions which later accompanied the annexation of Texas. To add to the confusion of the members of the Florida convention, there were rumors that a filibustering force was being organized in the Mississippi Territory to assist them in winning their freedom. This, with premature newspaper reports of their independence, prevented cordial relations with Governor De Lassus.<sup>21</sup>

At the next meeting of the convention, which occurred on the 13th of August, Holmes, in keeping with the instructions of Secretary Smith, sent his own personal agent, Colonel Joshua G. Baker, to ascertain the real views of the leaders and of the people at large. The convention was in session three days and then adjourned to permit De Lassus to act upon its measures. Its members did not expect him to approve their action, so they were deeply anxious to ascertain whether Governor Holmes had any definite instructions to intervene, in case they needed his aid. When Colonel Baker returned to Mississippi Territory, therefore, he was accompanied by one of the members of the convention and likewise bore letters from its president and from some of its prominent leaders, which clearly revealed their anxiety to secure American intervention. The most frank expression of opinion was given by Mr. John H. Johnston, who emphasized the corrupting influences of the "villainous Court sycophants" who were enabled to "batten on the spoils of the land" because so large a portion of the population consisted of American refugees or ignorant time-servers. This condition of affairs rendered necessary the devious methods which the "reformers" were pursuing. Such a population, he wrote, needed to be placed "under the conduct of a wise guardian who will transform them from slaves to men. Such a guardian we see in the United States, who is our mother, and I am confident that I say the truth when I say two-thirds of the inhabitants of this country complain that she has been tardy and has treated them with neglect."

He mentions the possibility of incurring Spanish vengeance if they break with the governor and asks whether the United States will then receive them into her "bosom". He then inserts an illuminating question: "If it is necessary for the convention to formally declare the province independent of Spain and call upon the United States for protection, will it not be proper to insert therein two or three stipulations of consequence to us but not interesting to the United States?" Aside from these conditions, which could not be considered "after annexation", they would

<sup>21</sup> *Democratic Clarion and Tennessee Gazette* (Nashville), July 27, 1810. Holmes to R. Smith, August 8, 1810, Gov. Cor. Miss. Ter.

"cheerfully submit in all things to the federal constitution". His "stipulations" were, that British land titles should be disregarded when the same holding was covered by a Spanish title, and, with certain express exceptions, a general amnesty to all Tories, deserters, and fugitives from justice.

These conditions seemed to imply that the "reformers" engaged in overthrowing the existing Spanish government were not wholly unselfish in their policy and that they hoped in this manner to obtain a reward in the form of free lands for the risk involved in their devious method of bringing about American intervention. Their attitude likewise seems to show that Colonel Baker, Holmes's agent, had been more than a passive spectator at the West Florida convention. His superior, however, told its representative that he had no instructions to justify his interference in West Florida. He was merely to collect and transmit to the seat of government information of the events that might happen there, but personally he hoped that all these "would eventuate" for the good of its people. In his letter to Secretary Smith he cautiously ventures to arouse the administration by suggesting upon the basis of a newspaper report that Governor Folch had just returned from Havana to Pensacola with a large force of troops that rumor said were destined for service at Baton Rouge.<sup>22</sup>

Governor De Lassus, contrary to general expectation, acceded to the measures adopted by the convention; but Holmes wrote in his next despatch that, "this surrender was not a matter of choice on the part of the governor" and, accordingly, the apparent harmony between him and the convention could not be of "long duration". Holmes did not believe the people desired to maintain an independent existence, nor was French intervention to be considered nor British intervention tolerated, even with the prospect of an excellent market in England for the surplus products of West Florida. He thought that the American party in that province would bring this matter before Congress at its next session, unless defeated by the activity of British agents.<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note that this same course of action—an appeal to Congress supported by the fear of British aggression—characterizes certain stages of the later annexation movements in Texas and California.

As Holmes anticipated, the harmony between De Lassus and the convention leaders was broken on Saturday, September 22, when the latter, fearing treachery on the part of the Spanish governor, instructed their military representative, Philemon Thomas, to capture

<sup>22</sup> Holmes to R. Smith, August 21, 1810. Gov. Cor. Miss. Ter.

<sup>23</sup> Holmes to R. Smith, September 12, 1810. Gov. Cor. Miss. Ter.

the fort at Baton Rouge. Thomas accomplished this early on the morning of the twenty-third, at the same time seizing the governor, and three days later the convention formally declared the independence of West Florida. On Monday, September 24, Holmes learned of the determination of the Florida convention to attack Baton Rouge, and this report was supplemented on the following day by a letter from Pinkneyville telling of its capture. This letter was accompanied by a petition asking for a mobilization of both regular troops and territorial militia to protect the border from possible disturbance arising from anticipated disorder in West Florida.<sup>24</sup>

One who is at all familiar with conditions then existing along the West Florida frontier, is inclined to suspect a petition of this character from such a storm centre as Pinkneyville. The outrages of the Kempers had given the region an unpleasant notoriety. Doubtless its inhabitants desired absolute security for themselves and their possessions, especially their slaves, during the upheaval in West Florida, but an equally strong motive was their wish to give the revolutionists all possible support. Many of their more adventurous citizens were already enrolled under the banner of the new state, and in their absence the territorial militia or the regulars might well assume the task of frontier defense. At the same time the presence of these levies, in view of the open sympathy of the Mississippi population, could not fail to encourage the West Florida revolutionists and their active adherents from the bordering territories.

From the manner in which Holmes received this petition there are strong reasons to suspect collusion between Abner Duncan, of Natchez, who bore it to him, and Dr. R. Davidson, of Pinkneyville, who prepared it. Duncan was the messenger from the West Florida convention, who, on September 24, gave Holmes an account of its action on the 22d. At midnight on the day following his first report, he brought to the governor Davidson's letter and petition of that date, September 25, telling of the fall of Baton Rouge on the 23d. Duncan had probably arranged for the transmission of this news, but it is significant that the letter giving it should have been accompanied by a petition to mobilize the Mississippi militia, signed by only a few signatures. The writer hoped that more "would not be necessary to induce the Governor to make the diversion required". American officials of this period certainly cannot be charged with remissness towards West Florida, and any danger that Duncan or

<sup>24</sup> Holmes to R. Smith (with enclosures), September 26 and October 3, 1810. Gov. Cor. Miss. Ter. Also *Democratic Clarion and Tennessee Gazette*, October 5, 1810, and *National Intelligencer*, October 19 and 26, 1810.

Davidson might overreach themselves by their haste was removed by Holmes's prompt action.

The Mississippi executive immediately requested Colonel Cushing to prepare two companies of regulars for patrolling the frontier at Pinkneyville, in order to guard against fugitive slaves from below the line and possible filibustering parties above. Later he changed this detail to one company for patrol duty and one company to be held in readiness at Fort Adams, and emphasized the danger from possible insurrection amongst the slaves. During the next few days he also issued orders to mobilize the whole territorial militia, and by so doing indicated a desire not only to protect his own jurisdiction but suggested the possibility of moral support to the Florida "Conventionalists". At any rate he reports in a later letter that when a "very considerable force" assembled in the lower portion of West Florida to oppose the movement for independence, the energetic conduct of the convention and their having had the address to turn to their entire advantage the nearness of this government (*i. e.*, Mississippi) "speedily overcame all opposition without bloodshed. This event was brought about as much from motives of humanity as from a just regard to the interests of the United States", although it was very probable that the tranquillity of Mississippi would have been "affected by a different result".<sup>25</sup> The governor thus acted for the best interests of the insurgents and for those of his own territory as well—a double purpose that had actuated him from the beginning.

On the 26th of September, Holmes forwarded to the seat of government a report of his precautionary measures and of events occurring in West Florida as late as the 24th. On the 28th he received a long-delayed despatch from John Graham, the assistant secretary of state, bearing the date of July 30. This was written before Madison's instructions to Smith, bearing the date of August 17, but from enclosures Holmes now learned the real attitude of the national government and that his own course in general had been in accordance with its wishes. It is a commentary on the lack of efficient means of communication and also on government methods of that day that he had received only one other communication from the State Department since his own letter of June 20. It speaks much for his ability that he had handled so well a situation which meant much to his country's future welfare. In his reply to the secretary he expressed regret at the delay in receiving this despatch. It left Washington on the 1st of August, and had it reached him on

<sup>25</sup> Proceedings of the Exec. Council . . . Miss. Ter., vol. I., and Holmes to R. Smith, October 3 and October 7, 1810. Gov. Cor. Miss. Ter.

the 24th of that month, as it should, he might already have had his militia in active service. But he hastened the mobilization in accordance with these later instructions.

Holmes's previous letter of September 26 informed Madison of the prospect of realizing his hopes in regard to West Florida but put him in a quandary; and as usual in such a case, he reported the matter to his political mentor, Jefferson. Personally his feelings and interests were aroused by the events in West Florida, but he doubted his executive authority to act. He thought he should await the action of Congress at its approaching session, although for seven years past he had maintained that the territory belonged to the United States and believed that in view of this claim and of previous Congressional actions he might fairly take possession of it. The successful party at Baton Rouge had not yet made any "communication or invitation" to the government of the United States, although, as we have seen from Holmes's correspondence, he fully expected it to do so, or to apply to Great Britain. This latter prospect led him to conjure up the spectacle of a "quadrangular contest" in which Great Britain, France, and Spain would forget the animosities of the past generation in order to make common cause against their upstart imitator in the West.<sup>26</sup>

In the course of the next eight days Madison received another communication from Holmes, dated October 3. This enclosed a copy of the West Florida Declaration of Independence, passed on September 26, a personal address of the West Florida convention to Holmes, and an explanatory letter addressed by its president, John Rhea, to the Secretary of State. It is interesting to note that in the folio edition of the *American State Papers* these documents are published as enclosures in Governor Holmes's despatch of October 17.<sup>27</sup> Madison certainly had them before him when he issued his proclamation of October 27 and directed his Secretary of State how to instruct Claiborne to take possession of West Florida. One is naturally tempted to inquire what impression Madison wished to create by postdating the receipt of these documents. We can only surmise that he was led to do so by the interview which Robert Smith held with the French minister, Turreau, on the 31st of October. In this interview Smith employed the following language, or at least Turreau so reported to his government: "As for the Floridas I swear, General, on my honor as a gentleman not only that we are strangers to everything that has happened, but even that the Americans who have appeared there either as agents or leaders

<sup>26</sup> Hunt, *Writings of Madison*, VIII. 109.

<sup>27</sup> *Am. State Papers, For. Rel.*, III. 395.



are enemies of the Executive, and act in this sense against the Federal government as well as against Spain."<sup>28</sup>

In view of the fact that both Smith and Madison certainly did know every step of importance regarding the revolt in West Florida up to the end of September, and that the real leaders there had so far clearly forecast the wishes of the Executive and were working in the fullest possible harmony with his immediate representative, Governor Holmes, this language seems to suggest that Smith was exemplifying the reversal of the well-known definition of a diplomat and was lying at home for the good of the country abroad. The necessity certainly rested upon the American government to justify Madison's proclamation of October 27 and the ensuing instructions to Claiborne; but the President and his Secretary of State could only do so by affecting ignorance of the events that led up to the declaration of independence in West Florida. It is hardly likely that they succeeded in deceiving Turreau, or the more astute Bonaparte, who had long been toying diplomatically with the wishes of Jefferson and Madison to possess the Floridas; but the arch-despoiler of Spain acquiesced in this act of minor territorial plunder, in view of the exigencies of his own commercial policy in Europe. West Florida was a petty price to pay for even the partial adherence of the United States to his continental system.<sup>29</sup>

A month later, on the distant West Florida border Claiborne and Holmes were jointly planning how to carry out the President's instructions in the most effectual manner, and with the least possible disturbance. By this date such a move presented much greater difficulties than would have been encountered a few weeks earlier. The faction that pretended to favor the continued independence of West Florida, or rather, that wished to make terms with the American authorities before entering the Union, had gained control of affairs, secured the adoption by the convention of a regular constitution, patterned after that of the United States, and, on November 7, had elected Fulwar Skipwith as governor, together with members of a senate and house of representatives. Governor Skipwith was inaugurated on November 29, when the new lone star republic began its formal but short-lived career.<sup>30</sup> A force of one hundred men was being organized for operations against Mobile, which Kemper and Kennedy, with an irregular force of Florida volunteers and American filibusters, were already attempting to

<sup>28</sup> H. Adams, *History of the U. S.*, V. 313.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 383.

<sup>30</sup> H. L. Favrot in *Publications of the Louisiana Historical Society*, vol. I., part III., p. 22, 26.

reduce. The presence of these armed levies and the reported determination of those in control not to submit to the United States without terms in regard to land titles and to refugees, rendered it necessary for the allied governors to prepare the minds of the people to receive them, and at the same time to overawe possible opposition by a show of adequate force. Accordingly they determined to send trusty agents to distribute printed copies of the President's proclamation throughout the territory. At the same time they were to obtain from Colonel Covington as an escort for Claiborne all the regular troops then available. Lieutenant-Colonel Pike was also to hasten the mobilization of the remaining regulars, and the Mississippi militia officers were to hold their commands in readiness for any emergency. These movements were to be directed simultaneously towards Baton Rouge and Mobile, but both governors in person were to undertake the reduction of the former place, Holmes proceeding overland, while Claiborne pursued the river route with the military escort.<sup>31</sup>

Having secured the speedy and quiet adjournment of his own territorial legislature on December 4, Holmes left Washington, Mississippi Territory, for St. Francisville, in West Florida, some twenty miles below the line of demarcation. On the evening of the same day Claiborne reached Fort Adams, and on the following morning dispatched two messengers below the line to distribute the proclamation at St. Francisville and at Baton Rouge, to collect all the available information, and to sound the sentiment of the people regarding intervention. One of the agents, Osborne, began his work on that day, so that when Holmes reached St. Francisville the following noon, he found the people in a state of great excitement. Just a week before Fulwar Skipwith had here been inaugurated as governor of the independent state of West Florida. He and many of his fellow-officials still lingered at St. Francisville preparatory to moving on to Baton Rouge where the next session of the legislature was to consider the ambitious programme which he had outlined in his inaugural address. It was this complacent dream of independent sovereignty, or more correctly, of ambitious dickerings with the

<sup>31</sup> The best account of the actual events of the intervention at St. Francisville and Baton Rouge is afforded by the two chief sources already extensively used, *viz.*, the Claiborne Correspondence, especially Claiborne's letters to Robert Smith from October 30, 1810, to January 3, 1811, as given in vol. VI., and the long report of Holmes to Smith, dated January 1, 1811, in Gov. Cor. Miss. Ter. There are a few items of interest in Proceedings of the Exec. Council . . . Miss. Ter., I.; in vols. 34, 38, and 47 of Miscellaneous Letters; in the Monroe Letters of the Lenox Library; in the Monroe Papers, vol. XII., MSS., Library of Congress; and in the newspapers. The accounts in the *National Intelligencer*, however, are obviously drawn from Claiborne's and Holmes's reports.

American Union on an independent basis, that Madison's proclamation so rudely shattered, and it is no wonder that those who had expected to profit by the transaction resented the loss of their petty advantage.<sup>32</sup>

The majority of the people were ready to welcome the authority that brought to them American citizenship, even in this unexpected guise. Relying upon this sentiment, Holmes, immediately upon his arrival, addressed himself to the task of reconciling the disaffected to the President's policy. The latter official, he explained, had acted in an executive capacity, with only the Louisiana Treaty and certain acts of Congress to guide him, and accordingly he could not recognize the West Florida legislature as possessing any authority whatever. He could only cite the general liberality of the United States toward its own settlers and promise temporary immunity for the deserters from its service pending the ultimate decision of the President, but he succeeded in inducing all but a few leaders, including Skipwith and Philemon Thomas, the "general" of the West Florida troops, to acquiesce in the programme of the American authorities.

In the course of his inaugural address the week before, Skipwith, after stating that West Florida was entitled to independence and that wherever justice and humanity were heard its demand was respected, had concluded with the following bit of turgid rhetoric:

But the blood which flows in our veins, like the tributary streams which form and sustain the father of rivers, encircling our delightful country, will return, if not impeded, to the heart of our parent country. The genius of Washington, the immortal founder of the liberties of America, stimulates that return, and would frown upon our cause, should we attempt to change its course.<sup>33</sup>

On the evening of this unexpected *dénouement*, however, after

<sup>32</sup> Undoubtedly one reason for Skipwith's attitude is to be found in his resentment because Madison and Jefferson had not supported him in his previous controversy with Armstrong, through which he lost his position as consul at Paris. This is shown by his alacrity in appealing to Monroe for justification as soon as the latter became secretary of state. Skipwith had been a very intimate and very effective friend of Monroe, while the latter had been engaged in his trying diplomatic experiences in Europe; and may have been a victim to the necessity of placating the group of New York politicians represented by Armstrong, or to Jefferson's and Madison's resentment against Virginia opposition represented by John Randolph, and, for a time, by Monroe himself. Naturally he was inclined to oppose this apparently new manifestation of Madison's enmity that was pursuing him into his West Florida exile. James Bowdoin, Thomas Sumter, Nicholas Biddle, and Monroe himself all testify to Skipwith's integrity and honesty of purpose. He later served in the Louisiana legislature and was employed in certain negotiations in Haiti. Cf. Monroe Letters, Lenox Library, and Monroe Papers, XII., MSS., Library of Congress.

<sup>33</sup> *National Intelligencer*, December 29, 1810.

his friends had failed to persuade Holmes to recognize him in an official capacity, Skipwith called upon the latter in a different frame of mind. He stated that it had always been his wish to bring about the union of West Florida with the United States, but he complained bitterly of the method Madison had now adopted for this purpose. By seven years' acquiescence in continued Spanish occupation, the United States had abandoned its right to the country, and the West Florida people would not now submit to the general government without conditions. Holmes did his best to persuade Skipwith that resistance to Madison's programme would be unavailing and utterly mischievous, but finding this fruitless, terminated the interview. Whereupon the affronted governor with a few of his unreconciled legislators departed for Baton Rouge, leaving behind for Claiborne the verbal statement, "that he had retired to the fort at Baton Rouge and rather than surrender the country unconditionally and without terms, he would with twenty men only, if a great number could not be procured, surround the Flag-Staff and die in its defense".

On the following morning Holmes, Osborne, and John H. Johnson, the last named representing Skipwith, crossed the Mississippi to confer with Claiborne, who joined them at Pointe Coupée. Johnson delivered Skipwith's bombastic challenge, but at the same time repeated his own assurances of devotion to the United States, and urged Claiborne to visit St. Francisville, where he would be welcomed and recognized as Madison's agent. This attitude on the part of a member of the West Florida legislature, and one of the leaders in the movement for independence, indicated the slender basis for Skipwith's hope of resisting the United States. Later the governors of Orleans and Mississippi together crossed the river to St. Francisville, where the former was received by citizens and military "with great respect", as the representative of the American government, and erected the region into a county, appointing such officers as were immediately requisite. Thus, on December 7, the most populous and wealthiest portion of West Florida, in the words of Governor Holmes, "willingly exchanged a system of government which peculiar circumstances had induced them to adopt, for that of the United States . . . an event most desirable to the great body of citizens".<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> McMaster, *History of the People of the United States*, III. 372, speaks of some opposition to the formality of taking possession of St. Francisville, voiced by Philemon Thomas. Neither Holmes nor Claiborne mentions this and the language used by McMaster suggests Skipwith's expostulation to Holmes the night before and his method of leaving later for Baton Rouge.

After conferring with Claiborne in regard to the difficulties likely to be encountered in their further intervention, Holmes, again serving as *avant courier*, departed for Baton Rouge, accompanied by "a few gentlemen of respectability" from the Bayou Sara District, and an escort of the former West Florida cavalry. On the evening of December 9, Holmes and his company were suffered to enter the town without opposition, and Skipwith in an interview reported that he personally had abandoned any thought of resisting the American agents, but he stated that he could not answer for the troops within the fort. On the following morning Holmes had an interview with their commander, John Ballinger, and assured him that for the present those who were deserters would not be molested, and ultimately he believed the President would pardon them. Ballinger then stated that he had concluded to surrender the fort to the United States troops. By this time Claiborne with the regulars under Covington had already effected a landing some two miles above the town. Shortly thereafter Holmes reported to him the pleasing information that "the armed citizens called here the convention troops are ready to retire from the fort and acknowledge the authority of the United States", without insisting upon any terms. The gratified Claiborne readily agreed that some simple and respectful ceremonial should mark the formal act of transfer; and under these conditions, at half-past two that afternoon, December 10, 1810, the men within the fort marched out and stacked their arms and saluted the flag of West Florida as it was lowered for the last time, and then dispersed. The short-lived republic that had served its purpose in bridging the gap between Spanish and American domination came to a close, while the cheers of its citizens, as voiced in Skipwith's letter to Claiborne, showed their "sentiments of unexceeded joy and self-felicitation in being taken into the bosom of my [their] parent country".

While in this same communication Skipwith expressed his gratification at the result of American intervention, he did not hesitate to criticize bitterly the method by which Madison and Claiborne had brought it about. He stated his belief that a surrender of the territory by "the constitutional authorities thereof as an independent state" was the only method that could give the United States "an unqualified and legal title" to its possession. At the same time as a native of the United States who had long been in its public service, he could not sign an order that might result in the "loss of one drop of American blood". So he yielded to superior force, but at the same time his "honor and humanity" led him to

recommend the deserters from American service to the clemency of their government and its agents.

Claiborne himself reported that much of the resentment aroused among the people in West Florida by Madison's proclamation arose from the fact that it was not thought to be sufficiently respectful towards their constituted officials. The unexpected American intervention also broke up the projected expedition against Mobile and thus "blasted the prospects of many aspiring individuals". The first feeling of these was naturally one of "chagrin and disappointment", but a "little reflection and the interposition of some good men occasioned an amicable result". Several later memorials to the American Congress, however, show the existence of some latent dissatisfaction regarding land grants under the Spanish government, the disposal of the vacant lands of the territory, and the debts incurred by the provisional government. Skipwith himself felt particularly resentful because the administration paper, the *National Intelligencer*, criticized him so severely. When his friend Monroe became secretary of state he attempted to justify his course. In his reply Monroe stated what is, perhaps, the best interpretation of the administration's attitude in the intervention:

I shall say but little relative to the late affair in West Florida. I shall only remark that it was impossible for the U[nited] S[tates] to accept a title to it, from the revolutionary party. They would have been as much responsible to Spain, or any gov[ernmen]t claiming Spain, in taking it from the revolutionists, as if they had driven the Spanish troops out by those of the U[nited] States. Spain would always have said that this party was put in motion by the U[nited] States, for the purpose of masking their views. In taking the country from it, they would have had the same difficulty to keep the possession against the ultimate possessor of Spain, as if they had taken it by force. If war had been the consequence it would have fallen on the U[nited] States, not on the revolutionary party in Florida, who would have disappeared and mingled with the rest of their fellow citizens. In taking that course then the U[nited] States would have gained nothing as to title, or security; and would have lost in character and likewise in property, for [in] so far as they made the revolutionists any recompense for the cession they might make, [just] so far it would be an entire loss.<sup>35</sup>

One is tempted to compare this letter with Claiborne's of June 14, 1810, or with the statement of Robert Smith to Turreau,<sup>36</sup> but the result would be simply to confirm him in the impression that the West Florida policy of Livingston, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe is the most tortuous, mismanaged, and indefensible in our

<sup>35</sup> Monroe to Skipwith, October 22, 1811. MSS., Ford Collection, Lenox Library.

<sup>36</sup> *Supra*, pp. 297 and 304-305.

diplomatic history. Moreover, there was still to be added to the chapter of incompetency the apprehensive explanations of Armstrong and Pinckney to Napoleon and to the English Cabinet, Monroe's apparently frank but really evasive interviews with Bernabeu, and Clay's labored but unconvincing defense of the intervention in the Senate.<sup>37</sup> It is only as we turn from such centres of diplomatic and legislative intrigue as Washington, Madrid, and Paris to the frontier itself that we perceive the true influences that brought West Florida into the American Union, and ultimately determined the ownership of the whole of the Florida peninsula. Such physiographic factors as its position in regard to the Mississippi and the Mobile, and its proximity to the territories of Orleans and Mississippi, which it separated; and such natural impulses as moved a population largely American in sympathy, really determined the future of this region; and they ultimately would have done so had the Louisiana Purchase never occurred or had the name of West Florida never suggested the most disgraceful diplomatic transaction of our history. Yet with the characteristic desire to save their own reputations for consistency, our officials utterly disregarded the very elements that enabled them to realize their specious interpretation of the treaty of San Ildefonso.<sup>38</sup>

The occupation of St. Francisville and of Baton Rouge established American jurisdiction to the Pearl River. Later Claiborne extended our control to the Pascagoula, and Wilkinson, by the military occupation of Mobile, to the Perdido. In this ruthless but expedient fashion our officials made good their plausible claim<sup>39</sup> to this portion of West Florida, which was later divided and annexed to three states of the American Union. It was not until 1819, however, that they appeased the dignity of outraged Spain by a non-committal treaty, and even in bringing about this result it is probable that the most important diplomatic factor was Jackson at the head of the frontier militia.<sup>40</sup>

ISAAC JOSLIN COX.

<sup>37</sup> See Instructions, vol. VII., and Spanish Notes, II., MSS., Bureau of Indexes and Archives, and also Papers in Relation to Burr's Conspiracy, MSS., Bureau of Rolls and Library. Clay's speech is summarized by H. Adams, V. 320, and is given in *Annals of Congress*, 11 Cong., 3 Sess., p. 55 ff.

<sup>38</sup> See Skipwith to Monroe, May 18, 1811, with enclosed statement, Monroe Letters, Lenox Library. J. Ballinger to Monroe, December 26, 1811; John Johnson and others to Monroe, August 17, 1815; Thomas Butler to Monroe, August 26, 1815; A. Massias to Monroe, April 5, 1816; in vols. 35, 47, and 50, Miscellaneous Letters, Bureau of Indexes and Archives.

<sup>39</sup> The diplomatic claim of the United States to West Florida is summarized by Ogg, Chadwick, H. Adams, Fuller, *The Purchase of Florida*, pp. 126-133, and H. E. Chambers, *West Florida and its Relation to the Historical Cartography of the United States*, in *J. H. U. Studies*, series XVI., no. 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Niles' Register*, February 27, 1819, XVI. 3.